

2 Advent B 2017
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St. Matthew's Kellers Church
December 10, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from our coming Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

In September of 1980, my sister called me, very upset. Our brother, who had become a born-again Christian, had told her that the world was going to end in a couple of months. That was the pronouncement of whatever fundamentalist minister he was following at the time. My sister Barbara did not want the world to end. She was in love, and hoped to marry Carlos and have a wonderful life together. So, to calm her, I asked her has our brother become a nuclear geophysicist? She asked, what does that mean? Our brother, who was also on the line, said, "She thinks I am full of it." Which was accurate. And, the world did not end in 1980. Nor has the world ended any of the times Christian fundamentalist ministers have predicted the world to end since then. Those who predict the end of the world will always be wrong. No matter what signs they point to. As Jesus said in our gospel for last week, "About that day and time no one knows except God." And as Peter wrote in verse 8, "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day."

Yet we have these scriptures, like our second reading for today, where the coming day of the Lord is described in horrific images. It makes us wonder. However, the images are not entirely terrible. Peter's letter contains encouragement, as well: Verse 9 "The Lord ... is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." We also have verse 10, which contains both encouragement and warning: The day of the Lord will come... and everything that is done on the earth will be disclosed." All acts of kindness will be disclosed. Great! All acts of abuse will also be disclosed. Oh. All truths will be revealed, as well as all lies. God will shine a light so all can see what we sinners try to hide. Therefore, Peter urges his readers to lead "lives of holiness and godliness."

John the Baptizer's message was similar. He called on the people in the area near Jerusalem to confess their sins and repent. Which they did. The meaning of the word repentance is to change the direction of our lives. To go from hiding what we don't want disclosed, to confessing the ways we fail God and our neighbors, and changing accordingly. In the wilderness John he baptized the people who had confessed and repented. And he told them to expect a greater prophet, a more powerful leader, one who would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit – who would bring light and life in strange ways.

The gospel writer Mark identifies John as the messenger going before Jesus, one who cries out in the wilderness and prepares the way of the Lord, as Isaiah

described it in chapter 40. When the people who came to see John confessed their sins, and repented of them, it was part of making “straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Confessing our sins and repenting are some of the ways we prepare for our God to come to us. It is how we ready ourselves, and how we ready our world. When we confess our acts of abuse and our lies. When we repent of them and deal with the consequences of our sins. The first of Martin Luther’s 95 theses was “The whole life of a believer in Christ is one of repentance.” In Luther’s Small Catechism, he sets out what baptism means for daily living: “Our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that daily a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.” We sin daily, and even more regularly than that; so we should repent at least as often. Even in the reading from Isaiah, which speaks so dynamically of God’s tender care for the people, there is that reminder, in verse 2, that the people of Jerusalem have paid for their sins, they have completed their punishment. This is not a whitewash that they did not sin. They sinned, all right; but they have paid for enough for it; in fact, a double sentence.

As I said last week, Mark’s gospel does not open with the story of Jesus as a baby. Mark wants to get to the point. Mark begins with a title: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Most scholars believe that Mark’s gospel was written before the others. Mark was the first one to use the word “gospel” – evangelion, in Greek. The word means good news – like the good news to come from a battlefield. In many ways, Mark’s gospel is about the cosmic battlefield, where God comes with tenderness for those who have sinned. This first sentence in Mark’s gospel is also the only time Mark gives Jesus the title “Son of God.” It is a bold claim. An outrageous statement. What Mark has to say is important. Everyone should pay attention.

The Christianity revealed in these readings is not a feel good religion, even though it begins with the words, “Comfort, my people.” The Christianity we find in these readings calls us to a way of life that trusts God for comfort ~ but comfort that is startling and continually challenging. We are urged to live lives of confessional honesty. To look to God, not to leaders, spiritual or otherwise, who urge us to false fears. Fears of our own sins are enough. Remembering how we treat those different from us is enough. Enough to make us run to God for mercy and grace. For we have the promises of God and of Jesus, Son of God, that God will comfort and God will treat us tenderly, even though our most impressive deeds are like a wilted flower or dried up grass. God will feed us like a shepherd. Patient. Reliable. Deeply concerned for each one. Amen